Accreditation Readiness and Barriers Survey: Executive Summary and Recommendations

May 2014

Developed in partnership with and funded by the Association for Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers.


Introduction

The discrepancy between the number of psychology internship candidates and the number of available training slots each year has reached a critical state. Although the psychology education and training communities are committed to addressing this issue, progress to date has been limited. The APA has recently allocated up to $3 million in grant dollars to expand the number of accredited internship positions, and the APPIC Board has approved the development of an Accreditation Assistance Center in order to assist with evaluating and supporting those internship programs that plan to seek accreditation. This study represents an effort to evaluate the barriers encountered by internship programs who wish to seek accreditation by the APA and to generate an accreditation-readiness assessment tool that may be utilized in order to best direct efforts focused on providing support to those programs.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, Mental Health Program (WICHE-MHP) was contracted to conduct an evaluation utilizing extant APPIC data as well as a survey of current APPIC members in order to 1) determine the real and perceived barriers to accreditation, 2) create a tool to assess the level of support/assistance that would be required to assist individual programs in becoming accreditation-ready, and 3) make recommendations regarding how resources may be allocated to support the accreditation process for eligible programs.

Summary of Significant Findings

This document presents a summary of some of the most salient findings of this study. It is important to note that not all findings are presented here. For complete information regarding all findings, please see the detailed technical report that accompanies this executive summary.

Intern Enrollment and Employment

Internship programs were asked to provide information related to the current and projected size of their intern cohorts and the support provided to those interns. Survey results indicate that non-accredited programs have significantly fewer interns enrolled in their current training cohort on average compared to accredited programs, and that non-accredited programs also plan to train significantly fewer interns in the next training year compared to accredited programs. Regarding the average stipend provided to interns, non-accredited programs report providing significantly lower wages on average than accredited programs ($20,790 and $25,037, respectively). Survey participants were additionally asked to identify what benefits are provided to interns by their training site. Overall across accreditation statuses, programs most frequently provide vacation benefits (93%), sick leave (89%), health insurance (80%), and professional development release time (81%). Internship programs provide professional development funding and “Other” benefits less frequently (30% and 29%, respectively). Accredited programs are significantly more likely to provide health insurance benefits and professional development release time than are non-accredited programs. There were no other differences between accredited and non-accredited programs regarding the types of benefits they provide. Survey results indicate that non-accredited and accredited programs do significantly differ in the nature of employment typically offered to interns. Specifically, non-accredited programs are more likely to hire interns as contracted positions than are accredited programs, and are less likely to hire interns as employee/staff positions than accredited programs. Non-accredited programs are also less likely to offer “Other” forms of employment to interns than accredited programs. “Other” forms of employment commonly utilized by internship programs were specified via a comment box in the survey, and programs indicated temporary employee status and a student/trainee classification as the most common other forms of employment.
Internship Funding
Survey participants were asked to identify the sources of funding that support their internship programs. Overall, approximately 75% of all programs cited a line item in the agency’s budget as a source of funding for internships, with non-accredited programs choosing this option slightly less frequently than accredited programs. Roughly 25% of programs cited revenue from reimbursable services by interns as a source of funding; non-accredited programs selected this option slightly more than accredited programs. There were no significant differences, however, between sources of funding when comparing accredited and non-accredited programs. The complete statistics related to this survey item can be found in the detailed technical report. In order to gain more information about the utilization of insurance reimbursement as a funding source, survey participants were asked about whether clinical services provided by interns are reimbursable in their setting. Non-accredited and accredited programs did not significantly differ in their response to this item, with 43% of non-accredited programs reporting that clinical services are reimbursable compared to 47% of accredited programs. There were no significant differences between accredited and non-accredited programs in terms of the process for billing (i.e., under whose license) or the insurers billed (e.g., federal assistance programs, private insurers, etc.)

Commitment by Sponsoring Institutions
Accredited and non-accredited survey participants responded to items related to the level of support and commitment provided by the program’s host institution. Accredited programs reported a significantly higher level of perceived commitment from the host institution to financially supporting the internship in the future. Host institutions of accredited programs were also found to provide significantly more sanctioned release time to support training directorship activities than those of non-accredited programs.

Seeking Accreditation: Currently Non-Accredited Internships
Non-accredited programs were asked to respond to a number of items regarding their plans and perceptions related to the accreditation process. The majority of respondents indicated that they have never submitted a self-study for accreditation, but have plans to do so. Most reported planned submissions by September 2014. Participants were also asked whether they perceive that their internship program is robust enough to meet accreditation requirements and whether they believe APA requirements for sustaining accreditation are feasible given their current level of resources. Interestingly, 91% of respondents indicated that their program is robust enough to meet accreditation standards, but only 65% reported that sustaining accreditation would be feasible. When asked about the perception of the necessity of accreditation by internship programs or their sponsoring institutions, most (73%) reported that accreditation is viewed as necessary, whereas roughly 27% of respondents indicated that accreditation is believed to be unnecessary.

Barriers to Accreditation
A number of survey items related to barriers to accreditation were utilized in order to collect information regarding factors that serve as obstacles for currently non-accredited programs who desire accreditation, barriers that currently accredited programs faced in the past on their path to accreditation, and barriers that currently accredited programs continue to face related to maintaining their accreditation status. Responses by non-accredited programs were analyzed to determine which factors are most often perceived as barriers in seeking accreditation. The barriers faced by non-accredited programs were compared with those faced by currently accredited programs in order to determine differences between these two groups. The barriers faced in the past by accredited programs were compared with those currently faced by those programs in order to determine to what extent currently accredited programs have resolved or minimized the barriers they once faced, as this information may be indicative of which obstacles are critical to overcome in order to obtain and
Accreditation Barriers Perceived by Non-Accredited Programs
Non-accredited programs were asked via the survey to indicate whether a number of factors were perceived as barriers to accreditation. Administrative burden associated with accreditation requirements was rated as a barrier by a greater proportion of programs than any other single barrier. Further exploration of this barrier yielded the factors of limited support staff, inadequate release time for conducting activities associated with accreditation, and time-consuming paperwork related to the accreditation process as the key obstacles related to administrative burden. Funding issues were also cited by the majority of programs as a barrier, with costs associated with ongoing accreditation fees, accreditation application and site visit fees, and the cost of faculty time for providing required supervision and operating the internship program as the most significant funding obstacles, followed by the cost of intern stipends and health benefits. Lack of institutional interest or support for the internship program was cited less often than the other major barriers to accreditation; however, when it was endorsed, respondents indicated that lack of support at the leadership or administrative level was the most significant obstacle. Lack of interest by training staff or the Training Director was not reported as a noteworthy obstacle by most programs.

Comparing Non-accredited to Accredited Programs
Several barriers to accreditation were rated as more significant, on average, for non-accredited programs than accredited programs. Specifically, funding issues, administrative burden related to the accreditation process, and a lack of institutional interest and support were rated as significantly greater barriers in the current experience of non-accredited programs than accredited programs.

Comparing Past and Current Barriers Experienced by Accredited Programs
Survey data indicated that accredited programs have significantly resolved or minimized the majority of barriers they faced prior to becoming accredited. Funding issues, high administrative burden of accreditation requirements, lack of institutional support or interest in accreditation, perceived robustness of the internship, and lack of belief in importance of accreditation were all rated as significantly greater barriers, on average, prior to accreditation than currently. Only the barrier of “inadequate resources”, including supervisory staff and time, was not rated as a significantly greater barrier either prior to accreditation or currently. That particular barrier was rated, on average, as a moderate barrier at both time points by accredited programs. The reduction of these obstacles seems to be an important consideration in the stability and sustainability of accreditation. Accredited programs rated the overall stability of their accreditation as very stable.